

# A Current Perspective

# PIERRE BOULEZ

by Jeremy Beck

In March, I had the pleasure of being one of forty auditors chosen to participate in the **1993 Pierre Boulez Workshop** at Carnegie Hall. The workshop – which took place over three days, March 10-12 included three sessions of score analysis and review, two conducting master classes with the Cleveland Orchestra and a concert by that orchestra conducted by Boulez. The workshop primarily focused on two of the four works Boulez was conducting on that concert: **Debussy's *Jeux*** and **Messiaen's *Chronochromie*** (the other two works were ***La Mer*** and **Bartok's *Piano Concerto No. 1*** with Andras Schiff, pianist).

Before this workshop, I had never met **Pierre Boulez** before nor had I ever heard him speak or seen him conduct live. Certainly I was familiar with his music, his recordings and his writings. I was curious; what sort of a person was Boulez? Were his many polemical statements about music ("Any composer who has not experienced the absolute necessity of the serial method of composition is useless!") a true reflection of his personal philosophy? Over the course of the many sessions of this workshop, it appeared to me that either Boulez was becoming more reflective in his older age or, perhaps,

his musical view had never been quite as rigid as he would have liked the world to believe.

The analytical sessions were never pedantic. Boulez was always interested in discovering the musical impulse, something to communicate directly to an orchestra. This is a fine line: balancing the formal structure and minute coherence of a work with a more intuitive sense of its musical ebb and flow. Boulez is a master at this balancing act. The tempi in *Jeux* change practically from measure to measure; Boulez explained that he allows Debussy's transfor-

mations of motives to lead him through the work. These transformations are perpetual; a principal motive can at any time become a secondary idea and vice-versa. Motives seem to vanish then reappear in a new harmonic context or are taken through a rhythmic transfor-

mation, often a condensation. Boulez traces Debussy's process of transformation by observing that the same pitch class indicates a continuation of an idea even though it has been transformed. Further, Boulez notes that when a motive's shape is transformed, the pitch class (or interval class) is maintained; when the shape is maintained, transposition may then occur. Boulez refers to these referential pitch classes as 'signals' – indications of continuity in a work which may appear to be completely fluid on

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the surface. This compositional idea of referential sonorities is not unique to Debussy; Berg makes use of the same sort of signals in his operas (in *Lulu*, the first ringing of the doorbell uses the perfect 4th Ab–Db. This later becomes the motive of fear and is never transposed to any other pitch level).

When asked about the influence of *Jeux* on his own compositions, Boulez stated that he is himself interested in ideas related by signal, that he will construct what he calls virtual patterns which occur in different realities. One example he cited was from his *Répons*, where a very precise sixteenth-note rhythmic pattern gets shifted then destroyed by the gradual introduction of grace notes within that pattern. In speaking of his relationship to Debussy, Boulez revealed a modified philosophical stance from that of his public persona: "In the 50s, we thought every change had to be completely different. . . now, one thing must remain constant as a point of reference. I am not interested in academic forms like ABA, etc . . . these are dead. I am interested in independent ideas which are juxtaposed in unanticipated ways like Stravinsky's and in the idea of a spiral, where the same ideas are used but are seen in a constantly changing light."

**Messiaen's *Chronochromie*** is a brilliant and difficult work, composed in 1960. Boulez had the opportunity to conduct this work for Messiaen before this master died in 1992. Boulez noted that Messiaen saw chords in terms of colors and that each instrumental group (and combination of the groups) is like a series of blocks or organ stops. While the importance of timbre links Messiaen to Debussy, this approach is completely unlike the fluidity of Debussy's method. In preparing to conduct a work as difficult for an orches-

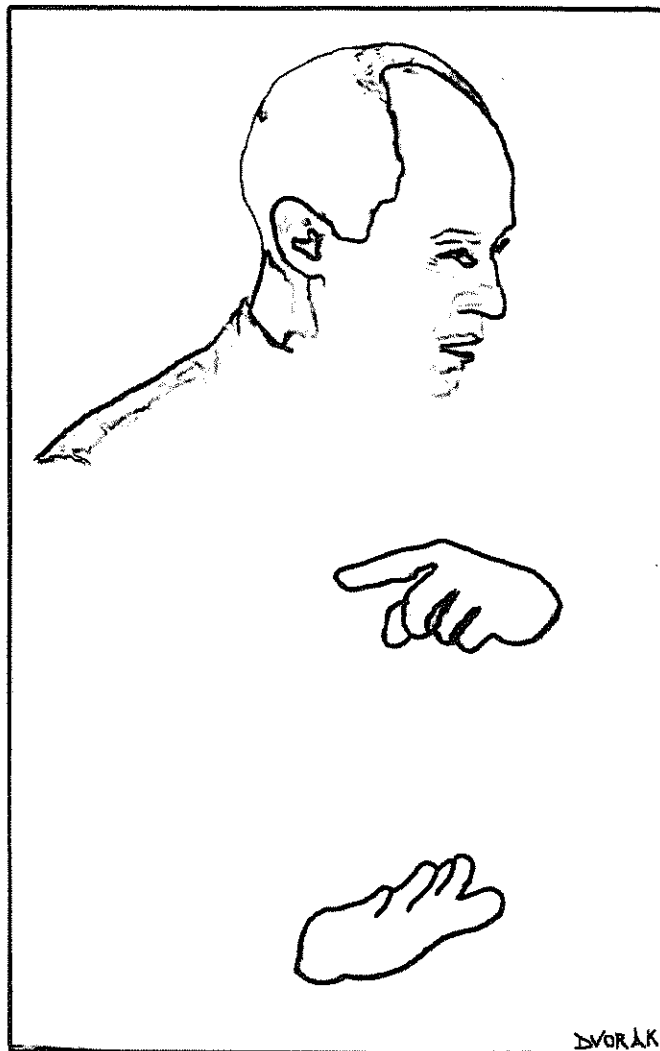
tra as *Chronochromie*, Boulez first looks at the form and then seeks to solve the problem of building this structure in a performance. Messiaen's piece is in seven sections, with certain of these sections being symmetrically related. Each section is constructed out of blocks of alternating timbres and rapidly shifting tempi. These blocks are immediately

juxtaposed; there are no transitions. Along with the tempi, the meter also changes constantly, but the meter in this work is artificial; there is no pulse. In this way, time is effectively rendered inert. Rather than being goal-oriented, one is given the sense of a vertical time, one in which events may present themselves and the re-present themselves at any point, juxtaposed in new ways.

Regarding practical matters of conducting, Boulez was often relaxed and, at times, light-hearted in response to questions. For instance, when asked if there was a relationship between the 2/4 and 3/8 meters at rehearsal #38 in *Jeux*, Boulez came back quickly with, "No – why always a relationship? You are just switching." In the same sort of mode, one which partly seemed at

odds with this composer's reputation, Boulez stated that ". . . metronome markings are rarely accurate . . . composer's metronome markings are like one practicing out of water: in water, there is resistance – like in the orchestra; the material finds its own speed. composer's marks are indications."

Boulez never studied conducting formally. He started in 1957, conducting new music which was not being done by anyone else. In learning to conduct an



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orchestra or a large ensemble, Boulez drew upon his experience in writing music for the theater. He "learned more from the way a director deals with an actor . . . psychologically, I deal with soloists [this way as well] – more talk, negotiation, give and take rather than direct orders."

When asked, Boulez graciously showed the auditors the scores he would be using to conduct the Cleveland Orchestra. *Chronochromie* had a few minor conducting patterns noted next to meters with denominators as obscure as 32 while *Jeux* had no marks in it whatsoever. Boulez remarked that when he was younger he had marked his conducting scores in great detail, but that as he grows older he does this less and less. As well, he used to conduct everything from memory, but now would rather have his own music in his head, rather than somebody else's.

"As I have grown more experienced, I have become more spontaneous with scores, because I know them much better . . . Thirty years ago . . . regarding Webern . . . we concentrated on the structure at the expense of Austrian tradition. Webern must be approached in the Austrian tradition – structure must be flexible, not always so strict."

After a musically invigorating three days, one came away from the Workshop with the knowledge that Pierre Boulez, this great musician of the second half of the twentieth century, is more complicated than the reputation which often precedes him. His musical instincts and skills are unsurpassed; when he conducted the Cleveland Orchestra, they followed every nuance of his fingertips (he does not use a baton: "I have ten batons" – as

he wiggled his fingers). In rehearsal, he was direct and precise, but also maintained a good sense of humor and was not above joking with the orchestra. The atmosphere was not charged with tension or fear, but was congenial and warm – great musicians working together to create brilliant performances of important and less familiar music. While Boulez the polemicist of years past may have argued for a rather too narrow view of what Western art music could or should be, Boulez, one of the great maestri of our time, demonstrated at Carnegie Hall that his musical philosophy casts a much wider net and we are all the richer for this.

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